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C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENTIANE 000183

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TAGS: PREL PHUM LA BM

SUBJECT: BURMA REFERENDUM: DEMARCHE TO LAO GOVERNMENT

REF: STATE 26677

Classified By: Mary Grace McGeehan, Charge d'Affaires a.i. Reason: 1.4
b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Charge delivered Reftel demarche to Deputy Director General for Asia and the Pacific Viroth Soundara on March 19. Mr. Viroth said that the GOL supports the roadmap process and will assess its success in creating a more representative system once it concludes. The Charge urged the GOL to press quietly for a more representative process even if it does not speak out publicly. Mr. Viroth said that the GOL expects the Burmese government to carry out its commitments to ASEAN (which include cooperation with Special Adviser Gambari). He said that Laos, as a neighboring country, has a special interest in ensuring that Burma does not become increasingly unstable and has urged Burmese authorities to accelerate efforts to reconcile with the Shan state, which borders Laos. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Charge met with MFA's Deputy Director General for Asia and the Pacific Viroth Soundara on March 19 to deliver Reftel demarche on Burma. The Charge emphasized that Laos, which shares a border with Burma and maintains a close bilateral relationship, is in a good position to quietly press the Burmese government to cooperate with Special Adviser Gambari and begin a credible dialogue on a transition to democracy.

¶3. (C) Mr. Viroth said that the Lao government has been closely following the situation in Burma from its embassy there. He noted that Laos and Burma are "good neighbors" and that they frequently exchange high-level visits. Mr. Viroth said that Laos's landlocked position makes it particularly important for it to maintain good relations with neighboring countries. Laos, he said, continues to support the basic principle of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), i.e., non-interference in each other's internal affairs. Mr. Viroth said that the GOL supports the Burmese government in its efforts to implement the roadmap and believes that the Burmese government needs time to carry out the roadmap process. The GOL will wait until the election and then see to what extent the government has changed. Only at that point will it be possible to assess whether the Burmese authorities have carried out their commitments.

¶4. (C) The Charge said that, even if the GOL does not speak out publicly on Burma, it can play a constructive role by engaging in quiet dialogue with the Burmese authorities aimed at achieving a representative process that includes a broad range of organizations and ethnic groups. Laos, she said, will be among the countries most affected if Burma descends into greater instability following an illegitimate process. She noted that Laos already faces a growing drug addiction problem as a result of methamphetamine trafficking from Burma and that there was an ongoing avian influenza outbreak along the Lao-Burma border.

¶5. (C) Mr. Viroth said that the GOL expects the Burmese government to implement all of its promises to ASEAN, including cooperation with Special Adviser Gambari. He told the Charge that the Lao Embassy in Burma had reported that Burmese authorities cooperated with Gambari during his recent visit. Laos, he said, understands the situation in Burma better than other ASEAN countries. (Comment: This was an apparent reference to those ASEAN countries that have publicly criticized the referendum process. End comment.) Mr. Viroth said that the GOL understands the importance of national reconciliation in Burma. It does not want to see the country split into warring ethnic factions and become "another Iraq." If this happens, Laos, with its proximity to the Shan state, will feel the effects. For this reason, he said, the GOL has urged the Burmese government to accelerate reconciliation with the Shan. Mr. Viroth added as a personal aside that Laos also has an interest in a positive resolution in Burma because the issue has impeded ASEAN's ability to make progress in other areas.

¶6. (C) Comment: With its close ties to Burma and its own non-democratic system, the GOL is highly unlikely to speak out publicly on Burma. Quiet engagement is more probable. While he drew from standard GOL talking points on non-interference and provided a disappointingly upbeat assessment of Gambari's recent visit, Mr. Viroth was also frank in discussing the GOL's concerns about instability in Burma and its impact on Laos. End comment.

McGeehan